



NARRATING TRAUMA, RESISTING ERASURE: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF PARTITION IN TOMB OF SAND

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ABSTRACT

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2018) offers a profound exploration of the lingering trauma of Partition through the journey of its protagonist, Ma. The novel examines trauma on multiple levels personal, historical, and intergenerational highlighting how unresolved grief shapes identities and relationships across generations. Through Ma's transformation from silent withdrawal to defiant self discovery, Shree challenges conventional narratives of Partition, bringing to light the often overlooked voices of women and marginalized communities. The novel's fragmented, poetic structure mirrors the disjointed nature of memory and trauma, reinforcing the complexity of historical wounds. Alongwith, the relationship between Ma and Beti illustrates how Partition's trauma is transmitted and reinterpreted over time, while Ma's bond with Rosie underscores themes of identity, resilience, and solidarity. With engaging with memory, gender, and the symbolic act of crossing borders, *Tomb of Sand* reimagines Partition's legacy, suggesting that healing comes not from forgetting but from confronting the past with empathy and understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* is a powerful meditation on the lingering trauma of Partition, explored through the journey of its protagonist, Ma. The novel delves into the psychological, historical, and intergenerational dimensions of trauma, illustrating how past wounds shape identities and relationships across time. Through Ma's transformation from silent withdrawal to defiant selfdiscovery Shree challenges conventional narratives of Partition, bringing marginalized voices, especially those of women, to the forefront. The novel's fragmented structure and poetic language mirror the disjointed nature of traumatic memory, offering a deeply intimate yet politically charged perspective on history. With tracing Ma's journey, her relationships with Beti and Rosie, and the broader theme of memory transmission, *Tomb of Sand* underscores the necessity of confronting historical wounds for healing and renewal. This paper examines how Shree reimagines Partition's legacy, emphasizing the interplay between trauma, gender, and intergenerational memory.

Ma, the main protagonist, demonstrates the lingering effects of Partition in subtle yet profound ways. Her journey from a state of withdrawal and silence to one of defiance and self discovery mirrors the process of confronting and healing from historical trauma. At the beginning of the novel, Ma is described as lying in bed, facing the wall, a metaphor for her retreat from the world and her refusal to engage with the present. Geetanjali Shree, in a book review, remarked, "In the case of *Tomb of Sand*, the image of an old, bedridden woman's back, who seemed to care to live no more and pushed deeper into the wall, as if to bury herself in it, gradually took hold of me." This withdrawal can be interpreted as a response to the unresolved pain of Partition, a trauma that has been buried but never fully processed. As the story progresses, Ma's decision to travel to Pakistan, the land she once called home, becomes an act of

reclaiming her past and confronting the memories she has long suppressed. Her journey symbolizes the need to face historical wounds to achieve healing and closure. Shree explores trauma on multiple levels personal, historical, and generational. The novel shows how unresolved historical trauma shapes identities and relationships across generations. The invisibility of women, as highlighted in Shree's broader work, is central to Ma's journey. As Chakraborty notes, "The invisibility of women is a recurring subject in Shree's work. It seems to be the natural state of women in India, where, despite modernity, men continue to take social and psychological precedence." This theme is particularly evident in how Ma's trauma, and that of other women, is often relegated to the margins of historical narratives. However, *Tomb of Sand* brings these silences to the forefront, asserting the significance of women's voices in understanding Partition's legacy.

The novel also describes the intergenerational transmission of Partition trauma. Ma's children, especially her daughter, Beti, are shaped using the unspoken stories and silences of their parents' generation. Beti's narrative voice often reflects a sense of confusion and curiosity about the past, highlighting how the trauma of Partition has been passed down indirectly. The younger generation's attempts to understand and piece together fragmented memories underscore the enduring impact of this historical event. Enjeti observes, "Shree scrupulously examines the demarcation between life and death, mother and daughter, past and present, and how grief and memory, when harnessed, have the power to cultivate long lost connections." Through Beti's perspective, the novel indicates that Partition's trauma is not only confined to those who lived through it but also continues to affect subsequent generations, shaping their sense of identity and belonging. Other characters in the novel also represent the psychological and emotional scars of Partition. The figure of Rosie, a transgender woman from Pakistan,

embodies the borders and identities disrupted with Partition. Her presence in the narrative serves as a reminder of the human cost of Partition, particularly for marginalized communities whose lives were uprooted and whose stories have been erased from dominant historical narratives. Rosie's resilience and ability to find joy despite her struggles offer a counterpoint to the trauma, suggesting the possibility of healing and renewal. The act of crossing borders, both physical and metaphorical, becomes central to Ma's journey. Her trip to Pakistan is not just a personal pilgrimage but also a political act that questions the artificial borders imposed with history. With crossing these borders, Ma embodies the possibility of transcending divisions and fostering connections between people and places that have been torn apart.

Shree's use of language and narrative structure further emphasizes the psychological impact of Partition. The novel's fragmented, nonlinear style mirrors the disjointed nature of traumatic memory, where the past intrudes on the present in unpredictable ways. The poetic, often playful language contrasts with the gravity of the subject matter, creating a tension that reflects the complexity of trauma. This narrative approach allows the novel to capture the multifaceted ways in which Partition's trauma continues to haunt individuals and communities. Memory plays an important role in *Tomb of Sand*, especially through Ma's journey, which forces her to confront her past. "What the heck are you on about? You know perfectly well this has been a headache for both countries, that neither has been able to figure out to this day who has the right to live where, who belongs where, and whom the law favours" (Shree 408). Her memories of Partition, long buried under the routines of domestic life, emerge in fragmented, painful recollections, reflecting the way trauma reshapes memory. The novel's language playing with words, time, and meaning reflects how memories evolve. In *Tomb of Sand*, memory is not a static record of the past but a dynamic, living force that shapes the present. Through Ma's journey, Shree challenges the official, often sanitized narratives of Partition, offering a more intimate and human perspective.

Healing in *Tomb of Sand* is a complex, nonlinear process. The novel indicates that healing is not about erasing trauma but about confronting, understanding, and transforming it. Ma's return to Pakistan is both literal and symbolic, a way of revisiting her past wounds to find closure. Her bond with Rosie reflects an openness to new identities and possibilities for renewal. The novel also highlights that healing is not a solitary act but a communal one. It underscores that healing doesn't mean forgetting but rather embracing the past to move forward. The novel's fragmented storytelling technique further emphasizes the impossibility of fully capturing the enormity of Partition's impact. By resisting a cohesive narrative, the novel reflects the chaos and dislocation caused by the event, as well as the ongoing struggle to make sense of it. At the same time, the playful, poetic language and moments of humor provide a counterbalance to the weight of these memories, suggesting resilience and the possibility of healing.

Ma's resilience is further highlighted through her interactions

with other characters, particularly Rosie. Rosie's presence in the narrative serves as a reminder of the human capacity for joy and survival despite adversity. Her friendship with Ma underscores the importance of solidarity and empathy in the process of healing. Together, they represent the possibility of renewal and hope, even in the face of profound loss. Shree also uses Ma's relationship with Beti to explore intergenerational trauma and the transmission of memory. Beti's narrative voice, often reflective and questioning, represents the younger generation's struggle to understand and reconcile with the past. Through their interactions, Shree emphasizes the importance of women's solidarity in healing from collective trauma. The character of Rosie also adds another layer to the feminist reimagining of Partition. Her presence challenges binary notions of identity and belonging, highlighting the intersection of gender, marginalization, and resilience. Her friendship with Ma symbolizes the possibility of connection and healing across divides. Centering on women's experiences, Shree not only reclaims their voices from the margins of history but also reveals the gendered dimensions of trauma and healing. Through Ma's defiance and self-discovery, the novel celebrates women's agency and resilience, offering a powerful feminist retelling of Partition that resonates with contemporary struggles for equality and justice.

Intergenerational relationships play a crucial role in the transmission and transformation of Partition memories in the novel. Ma's interactions with Beti illustrate how trauma and memory are passed down through generations. Beti's curiosity about her mother's past reflects the younger generation's attempt to understand and reconcile with a history they did not directly experience but which shapes their identity. Through Beti's narrative voice, Shree explores how Partition memories are reinterpreted and recontextualized over time, revealing the dynamic nature of historical memory. The novel also highlights the role of storytelling in bridging generational divides. As Ma shares fragments of her past with Beti, she not only preserves her memories but also transforms them into a source of connection and understanding. This process underscores the importance of intergenerational dialogue in healing from collective trauma and fostering empathy across divides. By linking Partition to contemporary issues and exploring the role of intergenerational relationships, *Tomb of Sand* offers a profound commentary on the enduring impact of historical trauma. It reminds us that the past is not confined to history books but lives on in the stories we tell and the connections we forge across borders and generations.

CONCLUSION

Tomb of Sand presents a detailed exploration of Partition's trauma, demonstrating how historical wounds continue to shape personal as well as collective identities. Through Ma's journey, Shree not only confronts the silences surrounding Partition but also reclaims the voices of those marginalized in dominant historical narratives. The novel highlights the importance of storytelling in preserving and transforming memory, illustrating how trauma is passed down and reinterpreted across generations. By centering women's experiences and incorporating nonlinear storytelling, Shree challenges traditional historiographies,

offering a feminist and deeply human reimagining of Partition. Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* indicates that healing is not about erasing the past but about engaging with it through memory, dialogue, and solidarity. The novel's exploration of borders, both literal and metaphorical, serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of history and the possibility of transcending divisions through empathy and understanding.

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